Teenagers and the Pitfalls of Online Social Networks

Associate Professor Katina Michael

Ask a group of teenagers how they spend their spare time and most will mention Facebook, YouTube, World of Warcraft or Second Life – 'virtual' social networks that bring millions of people together online. The benefits of social networks have been touted but what about the pitfalls?

Some teens will share everything about themselves to hundreds of online friends, most of whom they have never met. Twitter style prompts like where you are, what you are doing, and who you are doing it with reveal a lot about one's behaviours, one's inner thoughts, and even one's vulnerabilities. Some teens upload hundreds of photographs and videos that can be shared publicly, without comprehending the enduring repercussions their actions may have for themselves or others involved.

Given many teens carry smart phones, interfacing with applications like Facebook is very easy. The 'instant' ability to point, click and upload means trigger happy teens may be revealing way too much. It also means that someone who takes footage of you can use it as they see fit without your permission. A single drunken episode or an event showing a teenager engaged in compromising behaviour, freely distributed within a classroom of mobile phones can drive a teen to despair, and in some extreme cases even to suicide. There is no room for error in this kind of world, where everything is public. The personal space to make our mistakes in private, learn from these trials and errors, and move on is increasingly diminishing.

Teens that do not fit the established community can face humiliating consequences and become targets of cyberbullying, financial scams or frequent pranks. Similarly, being "unfriended" online can cause feelings of dejection, loneliness, and even depression. When a teen realises the friends they once entrusted with everything meaningful to them have the power to misuse this private information, it may not take long for anxiety behaviours to set in.

It is possible that this new generation of technologies is creating a new breed of mental disorders. While there are now established clinics where teenagers detox from heavy Internet usage - some re-learning bodily functions like eating, sleeping and going to the toilet - there are many who deny these kinds of side-effects exist.

But ask a teenager how often they update their status entry in Facebook, or how often they will send a text to a "friend" and then check for a reply, and you will probably be astounded at the answer. Some teens even provide false status updates to look like they are busy, while still others develop obsessive behaviours like leaving endless notes on people's online wallpaper or constantly looking up a friend's physical location. Such online references like "you are tagged" or "you are being followed" or "you are currently sharing your location" mean that some individuals might become increasingly paranoid, finding it difficult to distinguish between the physical and virtual worlds they live in.

The study of the negative effects of social networking on teenagers is still in its infancy. More resources are needed to fund mental health projects which investigate the impact of Internet based social networks upon young people, particularly those who are insecure, prone to depression, suffer with obsessive compulsive disorder or some form of personality disorder.

The subsequent negative fallout from social networks upon the community also has to be measured and effective programs to especially help educate school children on how to exploit these applications, and not be exploited by them, must be made available.

Dr Katina Michael is an associate professor in Information Technology at the University of Wollongong and collaborator on the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Panel at the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute.